

Notes on Democracy

The *Scientific American* published a brief article, "The Tribalism of Truth" by Mathew Fisher, Joshua Knobe, Brent Strickland and Frank C. Keil (Feb. 2018, pp. 44-47), which posed the issue of how people argue about controversial questions. That is, they either argue to **win** or they argue to **learn**. Usually, if they argue to win, they believe that there is one and only one correct answer to the question at hand, and that all others are simply wrong. If they argue to learn, they usually believe that there may be several correct answers to a question and that learning from others' viewpoints should allow a compromise that is better informed. The former are labeled 'objectivists' by the authors and the latter 'relativists'.

It was this article that focused my thinking on this topic and suggested to me that most of the major systems of thought that govern the western world today are diametrically opposed to the idea of democracy. Strongly held opinions, based either in science, religion, ideology or even Wikipedia, are likely to urge people to argue to win. The Indian parable, "The Blind Men and the Elephant", is not likely to be appreciated by such people. Indeed, they will interpret any response that is not simply total agreement with their position as a challenge and an argument that must be won over. The idea of relativity is quite unacceptable. This is not to say that extreme relativism, such as that found in some versions of postmodernism is any more acceptable. Indeed, Aristotle's "Measure in All Things", must still be the motto, whatever the situation.

Democracy must be based on the idea that there may be several truths concerning a particular social topic, social meant in the broad sense as to include all political, economic or broadly cultural topics, as well. This is because human beings are conscious beings in communication with each other and potentially able at any given moment to perceive the same things in very different ways. Gestalt psychology has shown this quite graphically and Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is also illustrative of this idea. We also have more recent discussions of this topic by Rupert Sheldrake on Morphic Resonance, carrying the discussion further into the philosophy of science, itself. Democratic argumentation must be able to accommodate these varied 'truths' in compromises that resolve conflict. The criteria for judging these compromises philosophically must be both scientific **and moral**, remembering Plato's claim that any science without a sense of justice is not wisdom, but mere cunning.

I have argued in the past that this puts science in an heuristic rather than in a deterministic role in resolving **social** conflict, something which can be quite threatening to those who require certainty in their intellectual world. In phenomenological terms, it is the role of science to help us understand objective reality, as it is the role of art to help us understand subjective reality. Indeed, the artist has been given the right to point out contradictions between what we **think** we are doing and what we are actually doing. It is the role of philosophy to combine these understandings so as to help us **learn** what we

should do. This means that science may be extremely important in pointing out the many deterministic events in the natural world. It also means that science can be extremely useful in pointing out the many unintended and/or unanticipated consequences of human actions in the social world. But it does not mean that there is one, and only one correct solution to a social problem, whether in mathematical terms or not.

The several schools of economic thought illustrate this problem very well. Economics contains a series of ontological and epistemological assumptions. These assumptions, as the word implies, are not examined empirically, but are assumed to be true. They are ideological in nature, growing out of the experience with mercantilism and industrialization following the renaissance, and first formalized by Adam Smith in the late 18th century. They have serious moral implications as does any ideology, but these implications are ignored on the assumption that economics is a science, searching for universal laws. According to this assumption human behavior is a product of the deterministic and mechanistic nature of these laws: there is, therefore, no possibility of free will or moral responsibility related to this behavior. What meaning can individualism and the 'free market' have in such a context?

Economics would like to be seen as the physics of social science, even if it requires "mathematizing" to establish this symbolic status in the social and academic world. It essentially ignores human beings, presenting them as the caricature, "economic man", while assuming that his well-being depends only upon the accumulation of money. His happiness is assumed to be equal to wealth, with little empirical research to establish the limitations of this framework (Gender is intended, as economics is largely a male science; indeed, the very idea of economics as somehow separate from the rest of society is to a large extent a product of the compartmentalized male brain, as attested to by the research reported in Mark Gungor's book and in his YouTube presentations). This search for certainty and its 'arguing to win' severely limit the democratic potential of economics as a social science. Indeed, we are currently suffering from these limitations in our current pseudo-scientific, manmade economic crisis.

In short, determinism and its need for certainty are quite antithetical to democracy. Our discussion on the future of democracy must at some point confront this dilemma.

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